

PATRONS AND GO-BETWEENS:

A selection from the Spencer Research Library's Pre-Raphaelite collections.

The "Pre-Raphaelite" revolution in 19th-century art, literature, and life-style began in August 1848, when three light-hearted egotistical young English art students found the contemporary art they were being taught hypocritical "slosh", and elaborated their aversion into a deliberately shocking set of principles. Paintings by the "Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" were first exhibited in spring 1849, but largely ignored until early 1850, when the PRB's ukases appeared in print, causing a rain of vituperation to descend on them and their works. But by the late 1850s the eminent art critic John Ruskin had pronounced them artists worth consideration, and both the professional art-world and the popular press were developing a serious interest in the colorful group.

From then to the end of the century Pre-Raphaelitism in art and literature was always part of the Victorian intellectual world, whether scorned, revered, or popularized. We ourselves would not be writing, painting, or thinking quite as we do had the PRBs never existed.

The original PRBs were the flamboyant undisciplined poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), the serious visionary technician W. Holman Hunt (1827-1910), and the facile and charming prodigy J. E. Millais (1829-1896), all students at the Royal Academy, London. Four more young artists (or art-critics) of less talent joined the Brotherhood before the roster closed. Though older, and never formally a PRB, Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893), would be quietly smoking on the outskirts of the vociferous group, depended on as their only professional artist and the only one with a thorough technical Continental training. (Rossetti had adopted Madox Brown as a tutor in 1847, but soon substituted the more lenient Hunt.)

But the Brotherhood itself was only the nucleus of a circle of young anti-establishment artists soon called Pre-Raphaelites, which included what would later become notable names, and which overlapped other mid-century artistic, literary, and social circles (for instance, the Tennyson circle; or those struggling with the new scientific art of photography; or the fashionable artists who dined with the wealthy Prinseps of Holland Park).

These "Pre-Raphaelites" differed widely in approach, theory and technique, but formed an informal co-operative. They shared models, materials, clothes, money, news, and patrons. Patrons especially were hard to come by while the general reputation of Pre-Raphaelites remained under a cloud, and while the actual sight of the work might well disgust an artistically trained Victorian eye. But

the artist without a patron, or a job, or a market was in danger of death.

The Department of Special Collections holds over 700 manuscript letters (and a few other items) written to or from PRBs and Pre-Raphaelites. We also have a good selection of printed material by them.

Most of the MSS were bought in the 1950s and early 1960s. During that time the eminent Tennysonian and Pre-Raphaelite scholar, Professor William Doremus Paden of KU's English Department, searched antiquarian booksellers' catalogues for 19th-century English literary figures, and recommended research-worthy material to the Department for purchase. He collected in the same way for himself, and on his death in 1979 left the Department his collections, which we continue to enlarge.

ARTIST: ROSSETTI

PATRON: W. Blackmore and Mrs Blackmore.

DATES: 1863 Nov 16, 19, 24; 1865 Dec 1; 1867 Feb 2.

A group of 5 letters from Rossetti to the Blackmores.

W. Blackmore may be William Blackmore, d. 1878.

In 1863 Rossetti has just finished the picture commissioned by Blackmore (apparently "Fazio's Mistress") and is sending it. Discusses Blackmore's generous overpayment and Rossetti's gift in return of the preliminary sketch; the frame and its inscription; instructions for lighting. (The retouched picture is now in the Tate Gallery.)

In 1865 he offers a picture just begun (probably "Monna Vanna"): price and size.

In 1867 he thanks Blackmore for the 9-foot hollow tree for his owls, and discusses Melville's *Omoo*. (The exotic pets Rossetti kept at Cheyne Walk were notorious.)

ARTIST: ROSSETTI

ART DEALER: Ernest Gambart, 1814-1902.

DATE: 1864 April 2.

One of a group of letters from Rossetti to Gambart.

Gambart was the first high-pressure art-dealer in the English art world, specializing in contemporary paintings and handling sales and exhibitions for many of the Pre-Raphaelites. He also bought the copyrights of successful pictures, and had engravings made from them for popular sale. Astounding prices were now being offered for Rossetti material, who is here trying to cash in on his success by supplying the dealer with drawings made to order, despite his dislike for Gambart.

The Cheyne-Walk device and Rossetti's signature have been clipped from this letter, presumably for sale to an autograph collector.

ARTIST: ROSSETTI

PATRON: Constantine Ionides.

GO-BETWEEN: Aglaia (Ionides) Coronio, Ionides' sister.

DATE: ca. 1880.

A group of 19 letters from Rossetti to Mrs Coronio.

Constantine Alexander Ionides was the head of a family of exiled Greeks who became wealthy merchants and bankers in Manchester and London, and were an important element of the highly art-conscious Greek colony in London around Holland Park. Mrs Coronio had known the PRBs since 1864, was the confidante of William Morris and of Burne-Jones, and supplied Rossetti with feminine props for his pictures. Here Rossetti is communicating with Ionides through her.

The picture in question is "The Day Dream." A sketch of Jane Morris (William Morris's wife and Rossetti's love) showing her in a sycamore tree had hung over Rossetti's mantel since 1872, but his planned painting had been interrupted by his work on "La Pia," which also shows Jane. ("La Pia" is presently in the Spencer Art Museum of the University of Kansas. Visit it there or on the Museum's home-page.)

Constantine admired the sketch in March 1879 and commissioned a finished oil version, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. (A reproduction is at the left.)

ARTIST: HOLMAN HUNT

GO-BETWEEN: Augustus Egg, 1816-1863, R.A., one of the few Establishment artists who did not despise the young pre-Raphaelites. (See far right of this case for Egg's rescue of Hunt in 1849.)

PATRON & GO-BETWEEN: Thomas Combe, 1797-1872, director of the Clarendon Press at Oxford. A mischievous Dickensian elderly gentleman, who had modernized the Press by introducing Steam. He had become the wealthy patron of Millais, Rossetti, and Hunt, and the earliest collector of Pre-Raphaelite paintings and drawings. Mr and Mrs Combe treated the impecunious Hunt as a son; and Mrs Combe left the collection to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford as the "Combe Bequest".

PATRON: Thomas Fairbairn, 1823-1891, 2nd bart. Chair of the 1857 Manchester Art Exhibition; commissioner for the Great Exhibitions of 1851 and 1862.

Egg to Combe.

DATES: 1854 Mar 20, 27, 29. (From 1854 to 1856 Hunt was painting in the Holy Land; Egg is here acting as his London agent.)

A group of three letters transmitting Hunt's instructions for dealing with Fairbairn who is considering buying Hunt's painting "The Awakening Conscience;" Egg agrees to Combe's proposed title and price, and has Combe send Hunt's and Egg's pictures to the Academy. He adds a refutation of the modern belief that every picture has its price.

Egg to Hunt.

DATES: 1854 Aug 5; 1857 Mar 4.

Two letters from Egg to Hunt

1854. On Fairbairn's complacency in the face of the public abuse of Hunt's pictures in the exhibition ("The Awakening Conscience" and "The Light of the World"). Describes painting problems, and hopes Hunt's boredom with Palestine will fade.

1857. Problems with pricing your sketches before the auction.

TWO PICTURES OF HOLMAN HUNT

1858 May 12. A light-hearted self-caricature by Hunt in a letter to Millais. He is offering Millais' small son Everett a riddle. The letter itself is "calling our army together" to decide their approach to the Liverpool Exhibition, and gives news of Edward Lear.

A photograph of the same vintage, judging by the beard.

HOLMAN HUNT AT PLAY, 1856

Hunt to "My dear William" (Probably Rossetti's brother; possibly Millais' brother, or Allingham, or another), Thursday, Claverton Terrace.

Shortly after Hunt's return from the East. Arranging Thames boating with fellow artists Egg, F.G. Stephens, and Robert Martineau, a former pupil now sharing Hunt's house.

HUNT'S MEMORIES OF 1849

GO-BETWEEN: Augustus Egg (see far left of this case).

1890 May 16. Letter to John R. Clayton, an early friend.

Describes Hunt's financial and mental sufferings after the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1849 where his picture "Rienzi" was exhibited, reviled, and not sold. He was penniless and about to be evicted, when Egg, who had only the slightest acquaintance with him, appeared on the doorstep, took "Rienzi" away and found a buyer for it. Ends with a description of the shocking present state of "Rienzi."

This anecdote is expanded in Hunt's two-volume history *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* of 1905 (the two thick volumes marked PRB lying flat behind this caption), a pointedly biased but remarkable reference book which reminds us that throughout his life Hunt took on the responsibilities of a teacher and a historian. (It lacks an index, but the Internet supplies one)

Britannia in Kansas

an exhibition of materials from
the Kenneth Spencer Research Library
1997